UNSPOKEN, 'PRICELESS,' PLUS CHUCK DENNIE'S RETURN TO MUSIC MENT THE ART OF ADVENTURE

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Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. -Psalm 119:105



From the Editor

Out & About

Exclusive pics of your favorite artists! In this issue: Crowder, Andrew Marcus, Ryan Stevenson, MARi + more!



Relient K

Now into their thirty-something's, the two Matt's (Theissen & Hoopes) leave an open-ended invitation for fans of all ages to continue along their adventurous journeys.



Unspoken

It's taken thirteen long years for them to get here, now what? Front man Chad Mattson explains how coming full circle is just part of the ongoing processes of faith.



Aledo/Chuck Dennie

For all of the richness and musical gifting heard on *Gypsy Heart* by newcomer's Aledo, former By The Tree front man is just taking new discovery one step at a time.



Reviews

New music from Priceless, Casting Crowns, Hillsong UNITED, Todd Smith + much more!







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Web Ad Traffic Coordinator Kristina lames **We can do it better** | For this issue of *CCM Magazine*, we had the privilege of catching up with one of our all-time favorite artists, **Chuck Dennie**. If you know that name, you remember that Chuck was the former lead singer of the group, **By The Tree**.

By The Tree amassed success in the early 2000s with popular releases such as *Invade My Soul* (a *Billboard* Top 40 album, which also garnered two Dove Awards), *Root*, and *Hold You High*. That venture then took Dennie on a ten-year career as a pastor, serving large churches. All the while, Chuck preached love but hated himself. Read our feature, or check out his blog—he'll tell you this was true.

Like never before, our culture screams at us to be "successful." In turn, it also feels like it screams at us when we don't meet up to certain levels of perceived "success." The pressures are unreal, and before we know it, we're performing. Suddenly, our standard is no longer Jesus—in fact, it's everything but Him.

The truth is, earthly success is temporary. It's a hard concept to grasp, remember, we're constantly bombarded by worldly standards. **Paul** urges the Philippians to find joy—solely in knowing Christ: ...carry out your own salvation with fear and trembling. God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes. (Phil. 2:12b-13).

With his new band, **Aledo**, Dennie has now returned to music—it's the one outlet that fits him for conveying his story the best. Although this transformation is now years in the making, simply put, he says, "I know Jesus and He knows me. I am learning. *He* is perfecting me."

What is keeping us from relying on the Savior more than we do now? What has happened to our surrender? Something to think about next time we put on one of our shows.











Once a beautiful land, Aethasia is now covered by a sickly pervasive fog that corrupts everything it touches. But all is not lost. Rumors are spreading of a fledgling Resistance, who have the courage and audacity to try and restore Aethasia to its former glory, and to reinstate the The Great Engineer back to the throne of Aethasia.

And that Resistance needs you!







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Relient K — The Art Of Adventure

Sometimes fans will grow up alongside their favorite bands—sometimes bands leave an easy, open invitation for them to be invited on the journey. Now into their thirty-something's, the men of Relient K continue their pilgrimage, creating unique soundtracks of life along the way.

By Andrew Greer

Since their humble Ohio beginnings nearly two decades ago, the fine fellas of **Relient K**—that is, **Matt Thiessen** and **Matt Hoopes**—have fascinated the heads and hearts of millions of alternative rock diehards with artful tongue-in-cheek, musical adventurousness and spiritual thoughtfulness. With a grin and a wink, the creative duo, who are not just professional partners but life-long friends, have enlisted the vehicle of music to perpetuate hope even among life's most gloomy confusions in the lives of legions of listeners.

Frame-working their discography with a tactful teeter-totter between self-deprecation and self-reflection, the prolific pairing continues to earn the trust of Relient's loyal masses by utilizing the vulnerability of verse and rhyme to wrestle with their own flaws first, before encouraging fans to consider the same.

Now as thirty-something musicians with families and a mortgage, the still-young veterans unleash their, arguably, most experiential track listing to date, *Air For Free* (Gotee/Mono vs Stereo), examining the troubles common to humanity with creative brains and sensitive hearts. Commemorating the recording's critical release—and the band's fifth *Billboard* chart-topper— Relient K sits down for an astute conversation on the influence of music in culture, in the church, on their listeners and in their own lives.

CCM Magazine: The word that keeps coming up in reference to the new record, Air For Free, is "adventure." How did this record embody adventure?

Matt Thiessen: We were just joking earlier about how I don't really get that involved in the social media. I'm not attacking it all the time. Part of our adventure in life is finding things to do that get us out of the house and off the grid a little bit, or maybe disconnected from the devices.

I like to go for a run everyday, somewhere between seven to thirteen miles, no phone, and it's an adventure every day. Some days I'll see a guy trying to get across the street in a wheelchair and he needs a little help, so I'll go help him out. Or I'll go into a coffee shop and just get a glass of water and be sweaty and gross and say, "I'm sorry. I'm not buying anything, but thanks for the free water." It's an adventure.

All the songs on this album, we're trying to approach happiness in life from a very organic place. There are a lot of animals. And how I'm a 35-year-old man, and the growing and maturing as a person that I've been trying to be, those are all the adventures of life.

Matt Hoopes: There's actually an entire group of songs on our record that feel like an adventure to me. It feels like, not only a journey, but maybe it's something that is bold, that's pushing out of where we've been. Maybe it's something that is important but kind of about our story, about what we're going through. So even when I was grouping the songs together, there was one section that I said, "These are the adventure songs." That's the theme.

One section was like, "These are our rock songs." These are our important songs," was one of them.

[All of] these songs felt like adventure to me, so that was a kind of weird theme that kept recurring. Even when we did photos for the record, we called this guy Josh, who is a friend of a friend. We knew that he knew where all the cool spots were. It just felt like this adventure. I feel like it added a visual with the music that was already there, and connected it together.

CCM: As a band you are infamous for tongue-in-cheek. Yet sarcasm can be a bit caustic, or critical of others, yet you guys use it to point the finger at yourself first. To say, "OK, what's going on with me?" before opining about everyone else.

MT: It's not necessarily good to be preachy in songs. It's not good to point the finger and say, "You ought to do this, and you ought to do that." So a way to do that for yourself is to say, "You know, I could be better at this," or "Man, I made a mistake." And when a listener relates to the song, they identify with you. Then all of a sudden it becomes this unified sort of thing.

To do it with tongue-in-cheek...it's fun to put a little wink in your music. It's cool to do it in a way that can almost be taken seriously. As you say, there's some truth and realness to it, and then, at the same time, there's this playful, sunshine-y element to it, too, where hopefully the audience sees that we don't take ourselves too seriously.

CCM: And I think this adds to your listener-love. It feels like they are very connected to you guys, and it feels like you're very connected to them. I'm wondering if this is one way that you are taking care of your listeners. You're saying, "Hey, we are the same."

MT: Matt and I grew up being fans of all these bands. We'd go around to all the shows and meet these bands because they weren't in this holier-than-thou hierarchy of fame. As a band, we want to be friends with all the kids that are watching the show. We're all on the same playing field, and we all probably have things in common. It's supposed to be about having a love between brothers and sisters. [To Hoopes] I don't know—what do you think?

MH: I think we've always been able to connect, not only through our music, but through our personalities. The way we come across. The way we speak to people. I think that's always been a part of who we are, but also the identity of our band. I feel like that's a good thing. Life is too complex to come in and be negative and derogatory. You just never know what people are going through. These little glimmers of positivity are very important to us in music and something we've always tried to strive for.

CCM: You guys have had a really large faith-based constituency from early on, yet you also maintain significant mainstream access. How has this impacted how you create, how you relate to fans, to not necessarily be tied down to the parameters of the Christian music genre or church culture?

MT: There are benefits to both. Having ties to it, and not having ties to it. Having this—it's not a gray area—but it's an all-encompassing sort-of thing. Bands like Five Iron Frenzy, Sixpence None The Richer, and especially Switchfoot, taught us how to do it. How to just embrace the whole thing.

It honestly doesn't have to influence [the creative process]. You don't have to think about the audience all the time when you are creating something, you just think about what you want to create. It's good to know there are people out there who support it and come from different places.

CCM: So when you are creating music, you are not always thinking on this micro level—the audience and how they will receive it, but more of, "What I have to offer." And what we have to offer through our craft is our story, right?

MT: For sure. There has always been this comfortable place that we have found ourselves in when we are creating our music, our art. It's an easy thing to do. We just don't worry about what people have to say about us.

MH: Sometimes we don't feel like we quite fit in anywhere. That's the other side of the coin, is not feeling like we quite fit in with all elements of the church or elements of people who aren't connected with the church even. That's been something we have dealt with. We try to even embrace that fact. We are here being ourselves, and sometimes it doesn't always make sense to everyone, but we are trying to be honest and do what we do.

CCM: Feeling that divide, not always feeling like you resonate with this audience or that audience, does that tension provide some kind of creative outlet as well?

MT: Yeah. It gives us an identity. It's a non-identity identity. We're just the sandlot kids. We're out there on the fringes doing our thing. To us, it's been an Ohio thing. There are parts of our culture, and how we grew up, that defines how we do it.

CCM: It seems to me, music is the greatest medium by which we communicate with God, ourselves, one another.

MH: Music is intrinsically important. It is more important than we often give it credit for. There's a spirituality to it. There's a depth to music that is hard to describe. Even in just playing a thing on piano or guitar, there is something important there.

I was having this conversation with a friend awhile back. She'll post very meaningful and deep things on her social media. I was telling her she should write songs about that. *Doesn't this feel a little bit unfulfilling? You should finish a song about that.* This is what music is for. Part of what makes it important is how it helps us to express and connect and all be here together.

CCM: I found this quote of yours, Hoopes, on social media. So see if this feels like you. [Laughs] It was a picture of an old piano with all this character, and you said, "There is something about the imperfection of an old instrument that not only gives it character but tells a story and connects us to its past." Is this not true of us?

MH: What I was trying to say is it's almost like this thing has a soul to it. But we are souls. As people, we have souls. We are very complex and also a product of our experiences and the things that we have gone through.

As a musician, there is something to an old instrument. You like to think of the songs that have been played on it or everything it's gone through. There is something special about picking up an instrument and feeling connected to it. I feel that as a guitar player mainly, but I felt like in the piano I could hear it. I could hear Matt playing differently, I could see him playing it differently, and that felt important to me. I feel

like I can hear it on the recording, and in some ways, it helped guide our path.

MT: How old was that piano? Do you remember?

MH: It was early 1900s. I don't know exactly.

MT: Basically, we rented this AirBNB out on a dairy farm, and they had this piano [inside it]. The woman who owned the place, it was her great-grandmother's or something, and a lot of hymns were played on it. It was pretty pitchy, but we got it tuned up and that's how the record was created. It's a very piano-heavy record.

CCM: Think about all the years that instrument's been telling stories.

MT: Hopefully some of that trickled its way through, some of those hymns or something.

MH: And ultimately, the piano is not the important part. The song is the important part—the emotion, the feeling—but it's cool that the piano is in itself, as an inanimate object, a part of the story. I think that's beautiful to think about.

MT: It's like *The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe*. You're making the wardrobe out of the tree that grew out of the magic. \square



Unspoken — Full Circle

Along the way to completion of their anticipated Centricity Music follow-up Follow Through, Chad Mattson and band keep the faith and strongly finish the race—but for this veteran band with two albums to show, where do they go from here?

By Caroline Lusk

It's one thing to start strong. It's quite another to follow through, to continue delivering and maintaining that initial strength and effectiveness.

Without question, the band **Unspoken** started strong. Their self-titled debut album on **Centricity Music** yielded no less than four Top 5 singles. "Who You Are," "Lift My Life Up," "Start A Fire," and "Good Fight" each placed Unspoken squarely into the consciousness of Christian music fans world-wide. With "Start A Fire" peaking at No. 1, the band solidified their place as critical and fan favorites.

But as with all strong starts, the true challenge arises when it comes to maintaining that momentum. Such was the feat facing **Chad Mattson**, **Mike Gomez**, **Jon Lowry** and **Ariel Munoz** when they began considering album number two.

"Over the years, things get comfortable and it's easy to let things slide," says Mattson. "Our heart was to get back to those first passions we had."

Passions that eek out from the desperate attempt to pay rent every month and keep the power on. Passion that derives from the divine pursuit of a holy call on your life that defies what the world might deem acceptable or even reasonable. Mattson added, "We've been doing this for thirteen years. We are [now] in a completely different season of life. On the first record, there was so much struggle and desperation. This time around, there was a lot of gratitude and a sense of victory about some of the doors the Lord has opened for us. Being aware of that drove home the reality of God's sovereignty—He'll do what He wants when He wants."

Despite the intense pressure to live up to the success of the first record, the songs flowed with relative ease this time around.

"We all compiled a bunch of ideas. Our phones were full of voice notes," recalls Mattson with a laugh. "But by January, we only had three or four songs and we were starting to stress. That's when we had to come to the realization that our agenda had to go. We can work hard, but none of that really matters until He touches it and makes it something. Once we grasped that, we had so many songs we had to create a *Deluxe* edition."

With almost more songs than they knew what to do with, Mattson and company laid those songs in the hands of two very different and incredibly accomplished producers—

Seth Mosley and Chad Keyes, with each producer taking about half of the songs.

"The goal is to never do the same record twice," says Mattson. "We always want to grow and push boundaries. There's a lot of different music on this, which brings a little bit of a risk. But if you play it safe, there's usually not much of a payoff."

Suffice it to say, they didn't play it safe on album number two, aptly titled, *Follow Through*. While the tracks consistently bolster the main idea suggested by the title, an overarching theme wasn't necessarily intentional or immediately apparent to the band.

"There usually is a theme, but we just don't know what it is until six months after the record is done," adds Mattson. "He leads us to write different songs out of different things we're going through. At the end of the record, when it's done and you live with it for a bit you realize, 'Okay, this is what the record is about.' It's kind of amazing to step back and see the Lord work like that. Collectively, we begin talking and see where the Lord takes it."

It may have taken the guys a few months to extract an overarching theme, but just a few tracks in, and the message hits home.

"It's easy to start. It's hard to finish and finish well," says Mattson. "Spiritually, personally, we have to follow through. The little commitments and the small things we attach ourselves to can easily wane over time. It's so important to have the same passion and same heart in our walk with the Lord as when we started. A lot of us die-off toward the middle if one thing or another hasn't gone the way we thought it would. For us, the Lord really brought back that original sense of wonder."

For a band of thirteen years, this record is remarkably fresh—pulling from rich, emotional life experiences previously untapped in their songwriting process. Among those, Mattson's personal battle with drugs and his successful, multiple-year recovery.

"Life In The Death Of Me' is the first song I've ever written about drug addiction and recovery and my specific story and situation," says Mattson. "I grew up in church and am so grateful for parents who taught me about Jesus. I was saved when I was twelve and always had faith in Christ, I just never claimed the power to live for God. Finally, I just decided that lukewarm was no good. You've got to be hot or cold and I couldn't be hot, so I went the other way. I got into using and selling drugs.

"I was mowing lawns and had a landscaping business. One of my clients saw that my life was kind-of a wreck. He was a wealthy guy and told me that if I found a place to go, he would pay for it. He was a Buddhist, but was willing to reach out and help someone like me. At that point, I had some friends who were missionaries in the Dominican Republic. I asked if I could visit them for a while. This was in the middle of addiction and for the first time in my life, I began to hang out with Jesus. There was no way my life couldn't be changed."

Indeed, the change was seismic. He was able to get sober and has stayed that way since. It was also on that trip that he met his future guitar player, who came back to the United States with him, where they formed the band. Thirteen years later, they're stronger than ever, which, not surprisingly, inspired another song on the album.

"So Good To Me' just had to be on the record," says Mattson. "The Lord has been so good to us. We had to write songs that shared that."

From beginning to end, the project not only reflects their gratitude for God's grace in their lives; but also their sonic latitude, with each track an infusion of pop, hip hop and rock that reflects an even wider range of influences compared to their debut album.

"My hope is to write half the records for the fans we already have, and half the record for new fans and new people—whomever they may be," explains Mattson.

New and old fans alike will have plenty of chances to hear the new song when Unspoken hits the road later this year on a head-lining tour alongside label mates and friends, **Carrolton** and **Tyrus Morgan**. They'll then join a Christmas tour with **Crowder**

and **Steven Curtis Chapman** before heading out with **Casting Crowns** and **Danny Gokey** in the Spring of 2017.

"I'm really excited for people to hear this music," Mattson continues. "It's a growth that has the DNA of who we are in it...there are some really cool things that are going to be awesome for Christian music."

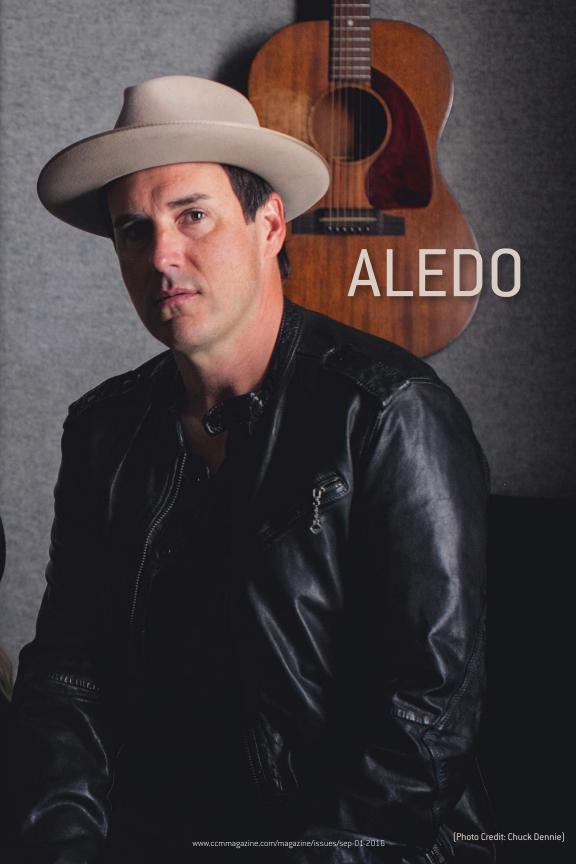
As passionate as he is about the music, though, Mattson's first love is evident, as are his priorities.

"There's a great verse about waiting patiently on the Lord to act," says Mattson. "A lot of us have been waiting a long time for Him to act. We have to keep fighting the good fight. He's moving and doing things and don't know and don't understand and a lot of us need to be reminded of our passion. We need to be hanging out with God. Church is a benefit. Christian music is a benefit, but none of them can take the place of knowing who Jesus Christ is and hanging out with Him. It's all about relationship."

With that relational priority firmly in place, Unspoken is decidedly clear when it comes to maintaining who they are and honoring *whose* they are.

"You have to communicate," adds Mattson. "That's not the answer to everything necessarily, but it's from which everything stems and it flows out of knowing Him personally."

For a band that's stood the test of time, and has been through thick and thin—the journey, to this point in time, has led Unspoken into deeper relationship with Christ. Albums and headlining tours are the resulting handiwork of the dedication to the call—it's that personal relationship which truly represents the beginning, the end, and the ultimate follow through.



Aledo — A Wayfarer Story

A closer look into the comeback album by former By The Tree front man Chuck Dennie reveals that he's just beginning the conversation to discovery—one step at a time

By Daniel Ritchie

If you were to take a step back to the early 2000s and examine **Chuck Dennie**'s life, you would quickly be impressed with the heights he had attained. As front man of the popular band By The Tree, success had become sort-of a habit. His band had cultivated two *Billboard* Top 40 albums, snagged two Dove Awards, and was featured on a number of well-received tours.

For Dennie, things were even clicking well off-stage. God had bought him the love of his life, and they began to start a beautiful family. After the accolades of successful musicianship and fulfillments of being a devoted family man were bestowed, he also found success as a lead pastor for nearly a decade. Seemingly to the world, Chuck Dennie was a superstar who had it all.

On the inside, however, "joy" was at best shattered and pain reached to near boiling points.

"Even when people wanted to know what was going on in me, I would find a reason to hide things in the darkness of my heart," says Dennie. For years, he sat underneath the unseen pressure of stardom. Are superstars supposed to get sad? Do they have bad days? Struggles? Instead of voicing these questions to a trusted source, Dennie remained silent. Eventually, the silence within him began to scream, resulting in a tattered heart.

In response, Dennie stepped away. Aside from his beloved family, he left everything.

Step one? Focusing his attention and energy on getting back to the foundations of who he was as a man. In seeking transformation, Dennie began the painful process of digging into the darkness of his own heart. "I wanted to look back in the shadows of my life and to do the work to become a better husband, a better dad, a better friend, and a better follower of Christ," he recalls.

Over time, the pieces of Dennie's heart and life began to become stitched together. As his spiritual and emotional health grew, he once again yearned for that creative outlet—but this time would be much different. More as a means to complete the transformation rather than a performance-based endeavor, Dennie tracked down a few of his close friends and a new band was born... **Aledo**.

In a matter of around two short weeks, Dennie and friends had completely composed and recorded their debut EP, *Gypsy Heart*. "[This was] a healing process for me and for my whole life," boldly claims Dennie. This was more than cathartic, it was truly transformational.

The timbre of *Gypsy Heart* also signals this change. While By The Tree may have exhibited shades of the rock band **Wilco**, Aledo's sound is more attributed to that of Pete Yorn or even **Fleetwood Mac**. If you'd ask the members of the fledgling outfit, we're confident that they are perfectly comfortable in their own skin—a trait that its leader, Chuck Dennie, can now finally and completely live into.

Still, that bold trust in the identity of this new project has not come without a sense of caution for Dennie. He plainly tells us, "There's always a fear that when you put yourself and your art out there, you have no idea how people will respond." Some might think he's stating the obvious, but after the heart-change that he has experienced, this takes on a much deeper meaning for Dennie.

After a quick listen, one may discern that *Gypsy Heart* is an allencompassing story about one man opening up about his struggles, and how God worked to resolve them. Taking it in deeper, rather, the album is more about merely starting those conversations—a revealing, and an insight into the searches and the processes that Dennie himself went through—a means to kick-start conversations that others may need help starting on their own.

The title track is crafted with that conversation in mind. The marvelously hopeful song promotes the fact that we all suffer alongside one another and begs the question, "Why not take the step to bear the burdens of one another?"

By many accounts, *Gypsy Heart* has garnered enough attention—and affection—by its critics. "Honest" and "transparent" are common terms, and anyone who loosely knows Dennie's story would certainly consume the project under the umbrella of those descriptors. For Dennie, however, he hopes listeners hear more than that. "I didn't wake up one day desiring to pursue transparency. I got to a place when I realized I needed to be open with what's happened in my life, and God has encouraged others to do the same through my story."



Casting Crowns
The Very Next Thing
(Provident)

FOR FANS OF:

MercyMe, Jeremy Camp

WE LIKE: "Hallelujah"



Casting Crowns' bread and butter is quite clear after fifteen albums and now 10-million units sold—gospelcentered lyrics married with slower-to-mid-tempo melodies. The band's songs have conveyed hope, joy, love and peace to millions, and **The Very Next Thing** follows suit in theme even as it branches in new musical directions.

The **Hillsong UNITED**-esque opener, "Hallelujah," gives a more dramatic feel to a release from **Mark Hall** and company. Other memorable songs like the title track, lead single "One Step Away," or "Oh My Soul" fit comfortably within the catalog, as encouraging songs for the journey from one step to the next

-Matt Conner

Hillsong UNITED
Let Hope Rise

(Capitol CMG)

FOR FANS OF:

Passion Worship, Planetshakers

WE LIKE: "The Stand"



Hillsong Let Hope Rise is the musical soundtrack set to the film of the same name, due mid-September in theatres. The movie chronicles the rise of Hillsong UNITED from their beginnings as a youth worship band in Australia to a global phenomenon as the "biggest band you've never heard of."

As you might imagine, the soundtrack gathers several gems from the band's deep catalog, including favorites like "Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)," "Hosanna," "The Stand," and "Mighty To Save."

-Matt Conner

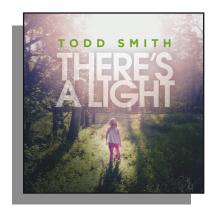
Todd Smith
There's A Light

(Curb)

FOR FANS OF:

Selah, Nicol Sponberg, Travis Cottrell

WE LIKE: "We Will Rise"



Award-winning vocalist and songwriter **Todd Smith** briefly steps outside of super-group **Selah** to release his second full-length solo effort, **There's A Light**. Known for being a passionate family man, the cover art alone tips the listener to its personal depth and richness.

Smith, father of five girls, harkens to emotions surrounding fatherhood on tracks like "Jesus Is"—written while his own dad was battling Leukemia—and the anthem "Calling All Fathers." Produced by **Ed Cash**, the overall timbre of *There's A Light* affords Smith more pop sensibilities, but the well-rounded album does a nice job tastefully sprinkling flavors of country and rock—there's even a duet with **Ellie Holcomb** on "Right Where I Belong."

-Kevin Sparkman

The Isaacs Nature's Symphony in 432 (New Day)

FOR FANS OF:

The Martins, Guy Penrod **WE LIKE:** "Yours Amen"



If you're expecting a traditional release from **The Isaacs**, you'll be disappointed only long enough before giving **Nature's Symphony** a spin of its own. The family band has penned a personal, moving album of songs marked by pain, loss and grief even as God's presence and grace shines through these experiences.

These fifteen songs, all tuned in 432 Hz (often referred to as "nature's frequency"), retain the group's award-winning vocal approach even as they dive into deeper, more vulnerable territory (see "Keep Breathing" and "Yours Amen"). It's a welcome detour from The Isaacs and one we believe will enhance their legacy and catalog.

-Matt Conner

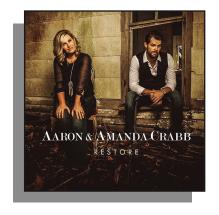
Aaron & Amanda Crabb *Restore*

(Difference Media)

FOR FANS OF:

Crabb Family, The Bowling Family

WE LIKE: "Back Together"



Restoration is a central theme in the lives of **Aaron & Amanda Crabb** these days. From the title of their new album, **Restore**, to their roles as church planters and pastors of **Nashville Restoring Hope Church**, the married duo are intent on bringing about the reality of restoration in the lives of those listening.

Songs like "Back Together" and the title track serve as powerful examples, while "Your Blood" focuses on the restorative aspect of Christ's crucifixion. The Crabbs' stellar vocal work delivers this theme in a powerful way on an album that sounds right at home from Music City.

-Matt Conner

Joel and Luke Smallbone, with Nancy Rue

Priceless: She's Worth Fighting For

(Worthy Publishing)



For a duo that's broken all the rules and forged through creative boundaries since they're onset, it's no surprise that the guys who comprised for **KING & COUNTRY** would write their first book in a manner that follows suit.

Unlike many books from artists that are either nonfiction or devotional in nature, **Joel** and **Luke Smallbone** have written a novel that offers an unflinching look into the horrific world of human trafficking. **Priceless** is gritty and compelling from page one, with nuances of redemption and hope that neither compete with or dilute the reality or proximity of this unspeakable epidemic.

From the onset, the main character, who will be played by Joel Smallbone when the film adaptation hits theaters this fall (instant visual!), meets with catastrophic loss that cripples his faith, compromises his sense of self and shoves him into a downward spiral in which desperation gets the best of him. Driven by the need to support his four year-old daughter, James unwittingly walks into the world of human trafficking that is as shocking to him as it is to the reader. As he navigates this seedy underbelly of society, he encounters multiple players that border on caricature, but ultimately bring this world to life for the reader.

While some scenes come across as a bit cliche, the Smallbones and co-writer **Nancy Rue** boldly tackle the difficult task of portraying the subject matter in a way that is graphic, but palatable. Perhaps even more difficult, they convey a message of redemption and grace unlike many other Christian novelists. The presence of Christ is not forced or manufactured. Moreover, it's not touted as a quick fix from darkness to light. As the relationships between the characters unfold, so too does the relationship between the protagonist and a God he had long since given up on.

Overall, the book does an excellent job of coloring multiple aspects of James' character and spirit. Others, primarily the female protagonist, could have stood a bit more depth and development. Be that as it may, *Priceless* compellingly delivers a message the Smallbone brothers have been touting since their debut just a few years ago—that women are priceless and should be treated as such.

Time will tell if the ensuing film adaptation can navigate the reality of this story without losing authenticity for the sake of not offending audiences. If it remains true to the book from which it is inspired, chances are, this story has the capacity to open eyes, awaken hearts and inspire action to combat this atrocity with integrity, pragmatism and faith in a God who determined the worth of every man, woman and child on the cross; without question or exception, He has deemed us all priceless.

-Caroline Lusk









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